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Evaluating Students in Translation Courses - Prospects and Pitfalls

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Abstract

Our article aims to discuss and analyse various evaluation and assessment methods used in evaluating both individual translation assignments and students' overall course performances in higher education translator training. It would appear that evaluation methods often fall into the sphere of 'tacit knowledge', i.e. teachers develop and apply their own evaluation tools, but these are seldom actively or publicly shared. We start by briefly discussing the impact of assessment on student learning in general, and in particular as related to translation competences. We discuss different approaches to evaluating assignments, for example grading vs not grading; forms of teacher feedback; self-evaluation and peer-evaluation. In regard to assessing course performance, we discuss methods such as continuous assessment; end-of-course exams; and various combinations thereof. Throughout the paper, we include a student perspective on evaluation by citing student feedback. We conclude that while different methods can be successfully applied at various stages of translator training, all evaluation should be designed along the lines of constructive alignment.

Keywords: translation evaluation method, translator training, translation course assessment, constructive alignment, translation competences

1 Introduction

In this article, we shall discuss various methods of both evaluating and assessing students in translator training programmes in higher education, and particularly in translation courses within these programmes. In this context, we shall use the term *evaluate* to refer to evaluating individual course assignments, and the term *assess* to refer to the numerical grade the students will be given after completing the course.

This article is a continuation of an earlier study (Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016), which focused on the overall assessment of students' performance in translation courses. In this study, we include the element of evaluating individual translation assignments. Our findings are based on our personal experience as instructors of both BA and MA translation courses at the University of Helsinki for over a decade, and our co-operation and discussions of teaching methods with colleagues working in other Finnish institutions training translators. Indeed, based on these shared experiences, a major driver behind this article is our belief that a great deal of knowledge on various assessment methods seems to exist only as 'tacit knowledge' which should be brought into light and discussed. We believe that this study will serve to increase transparency in assessment and evaluation in translator training, as well provide tools for instructors.

Additionally, since we feel that it is vital to also consider the points of view of the assessed, we are drawing material from student feedback received from 2013 to 2016, from five different English to Finnish translation courses (Professional Translation II, autumn 2013, 7 students; 2015, 12 students; and 2016, 23 students; Specialised Translation, Science 2016, 10 students; Specialised Translation, Literature 2016, 9 students). This feedback was collected from the students' end-of-course portfolios, which include both reflective self-evaluation and feedback on the course and its practices (see also Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016). Not all feedback dealt with the issues we are addressing in this study, but we have tried to take into account all relevant comments.

First, we shall discuss the importance of evaluation, in particular from the students' perspective, and describe different methods of evaluation. Then, we shall discuss and describe various methods of evaluating individual translation assignments, after which we shall discuss the overall assessment of students' performance in translation courses.

2 Why do we assess?

Assessment should not be understood only as the end point of a learning process where a teacher grades the students, or as regular check points during a course where the learning achieved is measured. We see assessment as a central, interactive activity that guides the whole learning process. It provides information for the teacher about the success of the teaching, and for the students on their own goal setting and the effort required in studying. In this section we will look at the central role assessment has in the learning process, and how it guides the acquisition of translator competences.

2.1 The role of assessment in the students' learning processes

Since assessment regulates learning, it should, regardless of the actual method, be constructively aligned, i.e. tied to intended learning outcomes (see, e.g. Biggs & Tang 2011: 11; Bloxham 2015: 109; Kiraly 2003). Assessment defines what students consider important, and how they allocate their time (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury 1997: 7). Effective assessment should always include the following dimensions: (1) purposes, (2) methodologies, (3) agency, (4) timing, and (5) orientation (Brown 2015: 110).

The purposes of assessment are manifold, including motivating the students, providing feedback on their strengths and weaknesses, predicting their success in future employment etc., and, on the other hand, also providing feedback to the instructors about how their teaching can be developed (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury 1997: 11). Assessment methods that help in guiding and facilitating learning, monitoring learning and developing the teaching process can be categorized as diagnostic; formative, that is assessment during the learning process or a course; and summative, or end of course assessment (Huertas Barros & Vine 2017: 3; Kelly 2005: 133; Martínez Melis & Hurtado Albir 2001: 277). Even though formative and summative assessment are often seen as mutually exclusive, according to Sally Brown (2015: 128) they can also support each other so that the summative grade contains a

formative element which provides the students with information on which areas they should strive to develop (see section 2.2).

Assessment methods can also be categorised according to who is the person who assesses: the teacher, the student herself or her peers (see Brown 2015: 111-112; Race 2014: 93). Even though assessment performed by a teacher plays an important role in the methods we describe in this article, in our teaching we also try to enhance and develop self and peer-assessment in our translation classrooms (see Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016: 324-326).

2.2 Assessment in the acquisition of translation competences

In courses aimed at honing professional translation skills, it is natural to link the intended learning outcomes to translation competences (Gonzales Davies 2004; Kelly 2005 & 2007; Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016; EMT 2017; Huertas Barros & Vine 2017). These competences comprise the professional skills that every translator should possess, from language and information mining skills to the ability to interact professionally with clients.

Due to the wide range of competences, teaching them should be spread over several courses in such a way that more complex skills are learned after the basic skills, such as practical skills in information mining. When the intended learning outcomes and the assessment methods of the courses are aligned, teachers should carefully consider which competences will be focused on in the individual course.

When we examine the contents and intended learning outcomes of the University of Helsinki courses in relation to the EMT competence categories (EMT 2017), we note that earlier courses (Professional Translation I and II) focus on language and technology (information mining) competences. In the intermediate level courses, the focus moves on to language and culture and translation (thematic) competences. Advanced level specialised courses and learning projects include technological and service provision competences (Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016: 317-320).

The assessment system used in our courses is continuous assessment combined with regular feedback. In this system, the final grade depends on several elements: the actual assignments, self-evaluation in the form of translation commentaries, class attendance, participation in class discussions etc. (see Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016: 322). This continuous assessment system also combines formative and summative assessment methods and can motivate students to take part in classroom interaction and complete their exercises to the best of their ability. Through the element of self-evaluation, the students will have to take responsibility for their learning processes, and they will acquire skills that will support their professional development during their studies and in the future (Way 2008: 93). When the students assess themselves, they also practice various meta-skills connected to service provision and cultural competences.

3 How to evaluate individual translation assignments?

In this section we will discuss various methods used in evaluating individual translations. The first clear juxtaposition is evident between numerical grading and

non-numerical grading, i.e. should the teacher give numerical grades on individual translations or not? We will also look at peer and self-assessment in evaluating translations.

3.1 To grade or not to grade?

Numerical grading, where each exercise is evaluated using a scale (usually 0 to 5), can be considered advantageous in the sense that it gives students a clear understanding of their skill level in relation to the intended learning outcomes of a course. The following three excerpts from student feedback deal with the importance of grades:

- (1) Personally I would definitely have liked to have grades for my translations. In the future, employers will not be giving grades for translations, and for this very reason it is important to get grades while studying, so that you will know your level and how much you need to develop yourself to reach the required level. Of course written feedback can give you an idea of the quality of your translations, but at least for me, numerical grades do this more clearly. Grades are important in other respects as well; I am interested in the student exchange programme, and grades have an impact in getting admitted. Therefore it would be important to know where you stand during the course, so that you can put more effort in the translations, and maybe get a better final grade. In addition, it is difficult for me to motivate myself without grades, and that became obvious in the case of this course; I could not be bothered to put as much effort into this as the other courses, where grades were given. (Professional Translation II, 2015)
- (2) Perhaps grades for translations, since mere written feedback remains vague. If the instructor says your translation is very good, does it mean good as in four or good as in five? (Professional Translation II, 2013)
- (3) I would also like it if we were given some kind of general grades for translations during the course. 'Mainly good' or 'fluent' may, at the end of the day, mean anything between 3 and 5, and it would be nice to have some idea of what the final grade will be. Of course, the grade, at the end of the day, plays only a minor part, and translating and learning how to do it, should be in the limelight, but grades would help in deciding if you need to for example invest more time in translating, and if some working methods should be changed. (Professional Translation II, 2015)

As evident from the comments above, some students consider evaluation where the course grade is based on the average of numerical grades as a transparent method. However, this requires a situation where every translation assignment has transparent and straightforward grading criteria, for example a list of acceptable and unacceptable translation solutions for every textual element. Creating such criteria may prove a challenge - and a laborious one - to the teacher responsible for it. Thereafter, the teacher should carefully consider whether to use the traditional method, (i.e. assign a set negative point value to specific error types) or to think of some other way of grading (cf. Garant & Garant 2001: 51-52; Garant 2009). Simply adding up negative points for the grade may prove unmotivating for the students, and may encourage them to avoid any risk-taking, which, in turn, may prove counterproductive. On the other hand, if the students are not aware how their grades are calculated, development and learning may not occur (cf. Brown, Bull & Pendlebury 1997: 16). Of course, complete lack of written or (in some cases) oral feedback for translations does not automatically follow from using numerical evaluation. In addition to the individual assignments, the final grade may well be affected by the student's active engagement

in class, reflective translation commentaries or self-assessment included in an end of course portfolio (cf. Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016).

In this article, when discussing non-numerical grading, we refer to a system where the instructor gives the students only written or oral feedback, and individual assignments are not graded on a numerical scale. This individual feedback from the instructor may also be visual, for example by using highlighting in different colours to mark stylistic or grammatical points (Moore 2015).¹ For the students, it is important that their successful solutions be also somehow noticed, be it in writing, orally, or even visually (cf. Brown 2015: 130).

When discussing evaluation with students, the non-numerical grading methods can be compared to working life situations where professionals are obviously not given grades. In addition, if the course grade is based on the grades of the assignments too rigidly, it may encourage students to avoid risks and adopt a single translation strategy that once worked for every assignment, which, in turn, may limit their learning. If there are no individual grades, students may be more willing to test their limits and take risks.

The following excerpts from student feedback demonstrate that all students do not require numerical grading for individual assignments:

- (4) I enjoyed the chance to concentrate on providing the best possible translation instead of stressing about a grade. That might be the reason why I had the courage to use more creative solutions and thus was able to employ more appropriate styles for different genres. (Professional Translation II, 2016)
- (5) I did not miss grades for translations, since assessing them is very subjective. (Professional Translation II, 2016)

On the other hand, as seen in excerpts 1-3, for some students, the lack of grading individual exercises may cause a certain feeling of insecurity. All student comments used as material for this study (see 1 above) are collected from feedback from courses where individual assignments were not graded numerically. Only the five students cited above (1-5) considered the practice of not grading worth commenting on; the rest of the students from all five courses apparently were satisfied with the evaluation system.

3.2 Further possibilities for evaluating translations

The evaluation methods for individual translation assignments described above mainly fall into the category of teacher-centred evaluation. Considering the students' future careers, it would be beneficial to also include elements of peer and self-evaluation in the overall assessment of the students' performances. Peer evaluation, for example, develops the students' ability to justify their decisions (see Kelly 2005: 142). It also encourages active engagement from students and provides training for managing group behaviour (Race 2014: 93). Furthermore, regarding the translation competences, the ability to evaluate one's own performance acts as practice for

¹ The highlights do obviously not exclude giving additional written feedback.

translation service provision competence. Similarly, peer evaluation can be seen to prepare the students for proofreading and quality monitoring (included in the EMT service provision competence). Peer evaluation can also be assumed to develop the students' language and culture competence, and, to some degree, also their technological competences (cf. EMT 2017.).

3.2.1 Peer evaluation

In translation courses, peer evaluation, i.e. students giving feedback on translations to each other, can be undertaken in various ways. Students can be divided into pairs or small groups, where feedback is given orally or in writing. Alternatively, the entire teaching group may comment on one student's translation in class (in this case the translation should be anonymised). This practice was noted in the student feedback in the following comments:

- (6) I found the course practices clear and functional. Class work in particular was useful. When the translations are discussed together, issues arise that I would not have thought of myself. And on the other hand, it is a relief to notice that others have encountered the same problems in their translations, and the same passages have been difficult for them as well, so it is not necessarily that my English is not good enough. (Professional Translation II, 2013)
- (7) I liked that we went through the translations together so thoroughly, and got to discuss various solutions even for individual word choices. This has been incredibly useful, and the feedback has thus been much more specific than in some other translation courses. (Professional Translation II, 2016)
- (8) The class discussions were really useful, since the other students provided new angles and knowledge for each assignment. Sometimes we also observed that the source texts could be interpreted in many different ways. (Specialized Translation, science, 2016)

Working in pairs, on the other hand, provides the students with an opportunity to analyse each other's translations more profoundly, as witnessed by the following comment:

- (9) About working in pairs. I thought the course was very well organized: there was time to work on the translation on one's own without having to synchronize schedules with several people. Our teamwork was in my opinion quite smooth, and S always gave me helpful and good comments. We both noticed things in each other's texts that had gone unnoticed by ourselves. Of course one can have bad luck in the pairing, but I enjoyed this working method. The text S was working on also happened to be the one that interested me the most of all the group's texts. (Specialized Translation, literature, 2016)

This comment seems to suggest that during the translation process, commenting on the drafts in pairs can be very helpful.

3.2.2 Self-evaluation in the form of translation commentaries

Self-assessment is considered "central to life-long learning and the development of professional competence" (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury 1997: 178). It can promote the students' independence and foster useful approaches to their studies in general (Race 2014: 93). In professional translation courses at the University of Helsinki, the element of self-evaluation is naturally included in the students' translation commentaries or diaries which are handed in together with their homework

assignments. In the commentaries, the students can list the translation challenges they have encountered, justify their solutions and describe their data mining processes (cf. Orlando 2011: 209-210). The teacher may also ask the students to note how much time they have spent on the assignment so that the students will learn to pay attention to their working methods and time management.

- (10) I feel the course has developed my ability to critically evaluate translations and translation solutions as well as my ability to receive critique and comments on my own translations. During the course I have consciously monitored my own personal translation process and tried to develop it in particular when it comes to time management and utilizing rough drafts. (Professional Translation II, 2013)
- (11) Although every translation assignment, feedback, and particularly the class discussions were useful in many ways, I feel my most tangible development to be in writing the commentaries. In my early commentaries, which were long and badly organized, it is difficult to find any relevant ideas, but in the later commentaries I refer to the translations accurately and focus on what is relevant. I am not sure, though, whether this indicates a better understanding and management of the translation process, or do I just express myself more clearly, but certainly something developed during the course. In the future I could strive to rely more on theory and use correct terminology while justifying my solutions and explicating difficulties, even though it would not be demanded. (Professional Translation II, 2013)
- (12) I have never been the greatest fan of translation commentaries, because writing them in addition to the translation assignment has felt like a burden. I may have to admit, though, that through writing them I have almost without noticing learned to analyze my translations and become more aware of the strategies I use, and which areas are difficult for me. (Professional Translation, 2016)

The reliability of translation commentaries has been questioned by some scholars (e.g. Englund Dimitrova & Tiseliuss 2009: 114; Massey & Ehrensberger-Dow 2014: 83), but the comments cited above (10-12) do suggest that in some cases writing them does seem to advance the students' professional development. We further believe that teaching students from early on to reflect on their homework will encourage them to put more of an effort into the translation process (cf. Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016: 325).

4 Assessing the students' overall performance in translation courses

The final assessment of a student's performance in a translation course can be undertaken in many different ways. For example, assessment can be divided into the above-mentioned (2.1) summative and formative categories. Summative and formative assessment methods are not, however, necessarily mutually exclusive; they can actually complement each other (cf. Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016: 324). In contrast, assessment based on a single translation exam and any form of continuous assessment in translation courses can be considered methods that rule each other out altogether.

4.1 Translation exam as an assessment method

A translation exam, usually at the end of a course, where everyone translates the same texts within a given timeframe, using similar translation aids, is a well-established, traditional way of assessing the students' translation skills. The benefits of this kind of an exam include measuring the ability to work under stressful circumstances,

which is often relevant for the translation profession. An exam is also – at least theoretically – the same for everyone, i.e. all participants are on equal footing.

However, as noted by Kelly (2005: 132), a typical examination can be criticised from several perspectives. As professional translation situations are concerned, examinations are unrealistic; the marking is error-based, and positive aspects of the students' translations are not taken into account, and the criteria for selecting the examination texts are often unclear. Indeed, if the examination texts are chosen so that they contain an element of surprise for the students (cf. Kelly 2005: 137), this may give an advantage to someone for whom the topic of the text is more familiar than to the others.

If the entire course performance is based solely on a translation exam, it is also possible that at least the strategically oriented students will concentrate on their performance in the exam instead of the course assignments, and thus their learning process will be limited in that respect. There is evidence of such patterns in e.g. a study (Pakkala-Weckström 2011) which found that the students whose translation course grades were based solely on an end-of-course exam spent considerably less time on their homework translation assignment than the students who were graded by a continuous assessment system.

4.2 Portfolio assessment

Portfolio assessment offers an alternative to test-based assessment. Here 'portfolio' refers to a collection of course work selected and reflected upon by students themselves (cf. Johnson 2003, Linnankylä 2001, Kelly 2005). The idea behind the portfolio is that students collect items they believe demonstrate that learning has taken place, in relation to the intended learning outcomes set for the course (Galán Mañas 2016: 162; Kelly 2005: 138). The portfolio usually includes a reflective self-assessment of learning achieved during the course by the student. The teacher can facilitate the reflective process, e.g. with a list of questions as follows (cf. Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström 2016: 323):

- How have I developed as a translator during the course?
- What have I learned about myself and my work routines?
- Based on my performance during this course, what are my strengths and weaknesses as a translator?
- What were the exercises that best brought out my strengths as a translator and which were the greatest challenges for me?

The translation commentaries we discussed earlier (3.2.2) provide support for students' reflective self-assessment of the whole course. The self-assessment may additionally be built upon feedback and translation commentaries and classroom discussions, but above all on retrospective analysis of the student's translations:

- (13) Individual feedback from the teacher was important and also helpful when compiling the portfolio. The portfolio was good in that it made me go through my translations thoroughly, which I might not have otherwise done, due to serious lack of time. (Professional Translation II, 2016)

- (14) The portfolio as a working method was also good, because when looking at your own texts retrospectively, you get a different angle. Polishing the texts afterwards also hopefully helps you pay attention in the future to the things you have had to revise. (Professional Translation II, 2016)

The self-assessment may also include an additional element of actual course assessment, where students are asked to provide a grade for themselves. However, the grade suggested by the student should not limit the teacher in any way, and this should be made clear to the students.

- (15) I did not think there were serious mistakes in my translations. In some texts I had slightly misunderstood something, and a few spelling or compound word errors remained in the translations, and sometimes the choice of terms could have been better. On the whole, my translations seemed to have succeeded rather well, so the course grade could maybe be 4 [out of 5]. (Specialized Translation, science, 2016)

The challenges of portfolio assessment could include the possible reluctance of some students to analyse their own translations reflectively. If the course grade is significantly affected by this reflective self-assessment, some students might be put in a weaker position. And conversely, is there a possibility that a mediocre translator will get an exceptionally high grade in a translation course due to excellent self-reflection skills? In order for the portfolio assessment method to conform to the principles of constructive alignment, the method should be discussed carefully with the students at the beginning of the course.

4.3 Other possibilities for assessing students' performance in translation courses

The final grade for a translation course can naturally be also based, for example, on a combination of an end-of-course exam and a portfolio, so that each account for 50% of the grade. Active participation in class discussions as well as adhering to given deadlines may also contribute to the final grade. External evaluation by for example professional translators or, in the case of authentic translation assignments, clients, could be useful, particularly for students who are near graduation.

5 Conclusions

In this article, we have discussed various methods for evaluating and assessing both individual translations as well as students' overall performance in translation courses. Our intention has not been to place the methods in any order of preference; different methods can and do complement each other, and in the different stages of translator education, some methods are better suited for the purpose than others. For example, for novice translators, peer and self-evaluation may require a certain amount of getting used to while in the later stages, their role may be considerably increased.

The main challenge in all evaluation and assessment is to find the methods that suit the teacher's teaching methods and teaching philosophy, at the same time helping the students to reach the intended learning outcomes of each course. It is equally important to make these methods transparent for the students, since there may be considerable variation between how individual teachers even within the same training programme assess students.

Further research into the various assessment and evaluation methods in translator training would be welcome, both on a national level charting general tendencies and intended learning outcomes (cf. Huertas Barros & Vine 2017; Pakkala-Weckström & Eskelinen 2018), and on a more detailed level, in order to provide translator trainers with shared tools and make tacit knowledge about assessment and evaluation more visible.

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